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Variations in migration motives over distance

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Descriptive Finding

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Variations in migration motives over distance

Michael Thomas¹

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

It is often assumed that long-distance migration is dominated by employment or educationally led motives and that local-scale mobility is linked to family and housing adjustments. Unfortunately, few empirical studies examining the relationship between motives and distance exist.

OBJECTIVE

Recognising that the relationships between migration motives and distances are likely to be context-specific, we explore and compare the relationship in three advanced economies: the United Kingdom, Australia, and Sweden.

METHODS

We use three sources of nationally representative microdata: the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) (2009–2018); the Australian Household, Income and Labour Dynamics (HILDA) survey (2001–2016); and a Swedish survey of motives undertaken in spring 2007. LOESS smooth curves are presented for each of six distance–motive trends (Area, Education, Employment, Family, Housing, and Other) in the three countries.

RESULTS

The patterns offer some support to the common assumptions. In all three countries, housing is the most commonly cited motive to move locally. Employment is an important motive for longer-distance migration. Yet, interestingly, and consistent across the three national contexts, family-related considerations are shown to be key in motivating both shorter- and longer-distance moves.

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CONTRIBUTION

Our analysis demonstrates how people move for different reasons, across different distances, in different national contexts. While typically associated with local-scale relocations, family-related motives are rarely mentioned in literature focused on longer-distance migration. The role of family in long-distance migration would thus appear to warrant far more attention than it currently receives.

1. Introduction

Conceptually, internal migration differs from residential mobility in necessitating a complete change in “daily activity space” (Roseman 1971): leaving behind one’s community, workplace, school district, housing market, and other institutional aspects of daily life. The inherent subjectivity of this distinction makes its analytical operationalisation problematic. In practice, demographers have typically drawn on two approaches.

The first approach defines migration simply as a move that crosses a geographical boundary (e.g., government district, region, or state), with moves within the geographical unit considered as residential mobility. Due largely to limitations in the data landscape, but also because the boundaries often represent the point at which resources are allocated (e.g., to local government), this operationalisation remains common within national statistical agencies (US Bureau of the Census 2006) as well as in the international scientific literature (e.g., in Germany, Kley 2011; the United Kingdom, Lomax et al. 2014; and the United States, Molloy, Smith, and Wozniak 2017; Gillespie 2017). Yet, regardless of the scale used, this approach has a substantial drawback: namely, the undesired effect of designating any short-distance moves crossing boundaries as longer-distance migrations. This misclassification bias is sometimes termed ‘pseudo migration.’ The second approach differentiates migration from residential mobility if the move exceeds a given distance threshold. Typical distance cutoffs include 30 km (e.g., Clark and Maas 2015) and 50 km (e.g., Clark and Huang 2004; Champion and Shuttleworth 2017), though distances as short as 10 km have been used (e.g., Boyle, Norman, and Rees 2002). While this second approach avoids some of the misclassification issues associated with boundary-based definitions, inconsistencies in the distance thresholds used make the comparison of study results difficult.

While geographical distance is obviously crucial in distinguishing migration from mobility, the motive underpinning the move can also prove informative. The common assumption is that local moves are motivated by life-course transitions, such as family

formation and dissolution (Kulu and Milewski 2007), and associated shifts in housing consumption and neighbourhood preferences (Clark and Huang 2003; Boyle et al. 2008). Meanwhile, long-distance migration has typically been assumed to be motivated by educational or employment-related factors, including job transfers or the promise of higher wages, better labour market prospects, or more educational opportunities (Borjas Bronars, and Trejo 1992; Clark and Davies Withers 2007; Böheim and Taylor 2007). The ‘jobs or amenities’ literature also informs us of the importance that migrants place on lifestyle attractions, amenity consumption, and a better climate (Niedomysl and Clark 2014).

To date, studies of the relationship between motives and distance remain rare. Niedomysl (2011) offers perhaps the most comprehensive treatment with his empirical analysis of Swedish survey data gathered by asking migrants to state the reasons they moved. His work reveals that the propensity to cite employment-related motives increases with distance while the propensity to cite housing-related motives decreases. While there are important differences in how distance and motives are reported and classified, broadly similar patterns have been found in studies looking at Australia (Clark and Maas 2015), Great Britain (Dixon 2003; Thomas 2019), New Zealand (Morrison and Clark 2011), and the United States (Geist and McManus 2012).

In this paper, we seek to build on this small body of work by providing the first cross-national comparison of how motives for moving vary with the distance of a move. Recognising that the relationships between migration motives and distances are likely to be context-specific, we use nationally representative survey data to explore commonalities and differences in the relationship in three advanced economies: the United Kingdom, Australia, and Sweden.

2. Data and methods

The analysis utilises three sources of nationally representative microdata containing information on the distance of a move and the reason for that move. For the United Kingdom, we use all eight existing waves (2009–2018) of the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), with (restricted-access) geocodes for Census 2001 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) (Knies 2017). Using the study’s panel structure, we use wave pairs to identify movers, the distance of their move between t_0 and t_1 , and finally the reason for their move (measured at t_1). The distance of move represents the Euclidian distance between the centroids of LSOAs at t_0 and t_1 . LSOAs are approximate to neighbourhoods and are designed to be stable over time and consistent in size, containing a minimum of 500 and a maximum of 3,000 individuals. Motives for moving represent answers to the question “Thinking about the reasons why

you haven't lived continuously at this address since we last interviewed you, did you move from this address for...?" Respondents are provided with six options, and the interviewer is instructed to code all that apply. The six options are: Area, Education, Employment, Family, Housing, and Other. To provide sufficient sample size, all wave pairs are pooled, meaning the analysis is based on a pooled cross-sectional sample of UKHLS wave pairs covering the period 2009–2018.

The Australian data is drawn from waves 1–16 (2001–2016) of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey (Summerfield et al. 2017). Similar in design to the UKHLS, HILDA is a nationally representative panel survey of approximately 8,000 private households (20,000 individuals). Survey handlers precalculate the distance moved using the great circle formula based on current and previous geocoded addresses.⁴ Usefully, the reasons for the move are based on questions included in the British Household Panel Survey (the precursor to the UKHLS), where a list of multi-response answers is provided in response to the question "What were the main reasons for leaving that address?" We aggregate the detailed multi-response answers into six categories matching those in the UKHLS and pool the cross sections.

The Swedish data is drawn from a Swedish survey of motives undertaken in spring 2007. Based on a stratified postal survey linked to official population registers at Statistics Sweden, the survey contains 4,909 migrants (Niedomysl 2011). The stratification of the sample means that the data is restricted to individuals aged 18–74 who moved 20 km or more (based on Euclidian distance) in 2006. By linking the survey to the population registers, Statistics Sweden provided precise distance measures and sampling weights. Unlike the UKHLS and HILDA, the Swedish survey of motives uses an open-ended question and asks respondents to state the primary motive for their move. Secondary motives are also recorded in the survey but have not been transcribed by the survey handlers and are not available for inclusion here. Using the transcribed primary motives (see Niedomysl and Malmberg 2009), we formed six categories matching those in the UKHLS and HILDA. A detailed breakdown of the sub-motives that make up the six motive categories for each country is given in the Appendix to this paper.

To enable consistent comparison, we match the Australian and UK samples to the Swedish sample by selecting those aged 18–74 who move ≥ 20 km. The final analytical samples for the United Kingdom, Australia, and Sweden are 3,011, 9,402, and 4,909, respectively, with the generalisability of results improved through the use of sampling weights and, for Australia and the United Kingdom, adjustment for complex survey design (stratification and clustering). The analysis is based on a description of the

⁴ Given the scale of Australia, the great circle calculation is more accurate than the basic Euclidean calculation of distance, as it accounts for the curvature of Earth.

proportion of migration events associated with a given motive at different points along the distance continuum. To aid interpretation and to avoid overplotting, LOESS smooth curves are used to visualise each of the six distance–motive trends (Area, Education, Employment, Family, Housing, and Other) in the three countries: the United Kingdom (Figure 1), Australia (Figure 2), and Sweden (Figure 3).

Figure 1: The propensity to mention a motive for moving within the United Kingdom

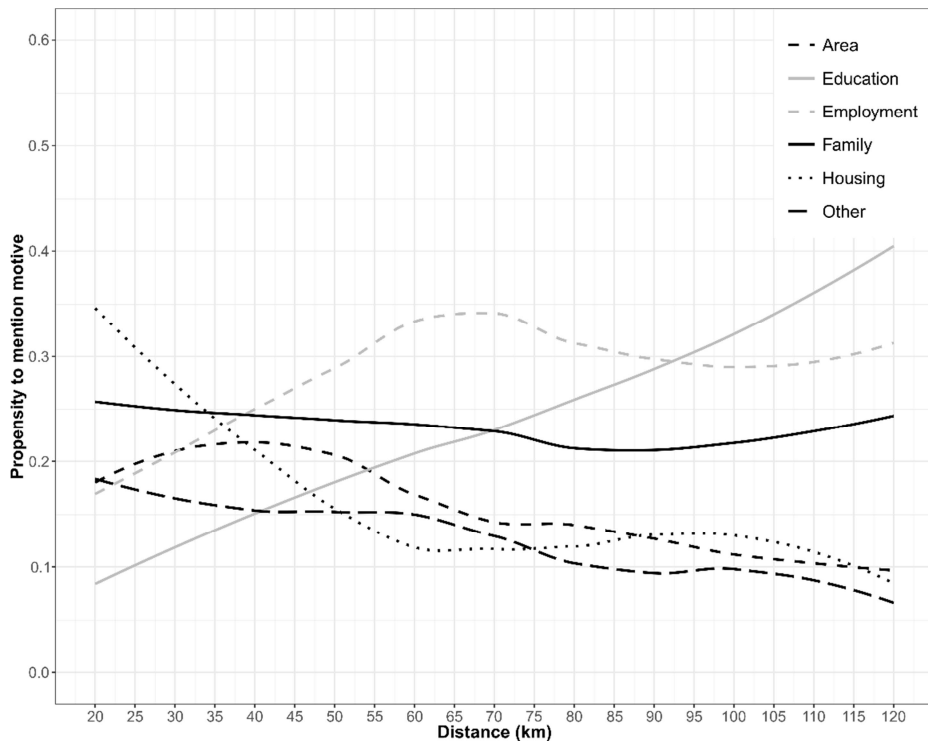


Figure 2: The propensity to mention a motive for moving within Australia

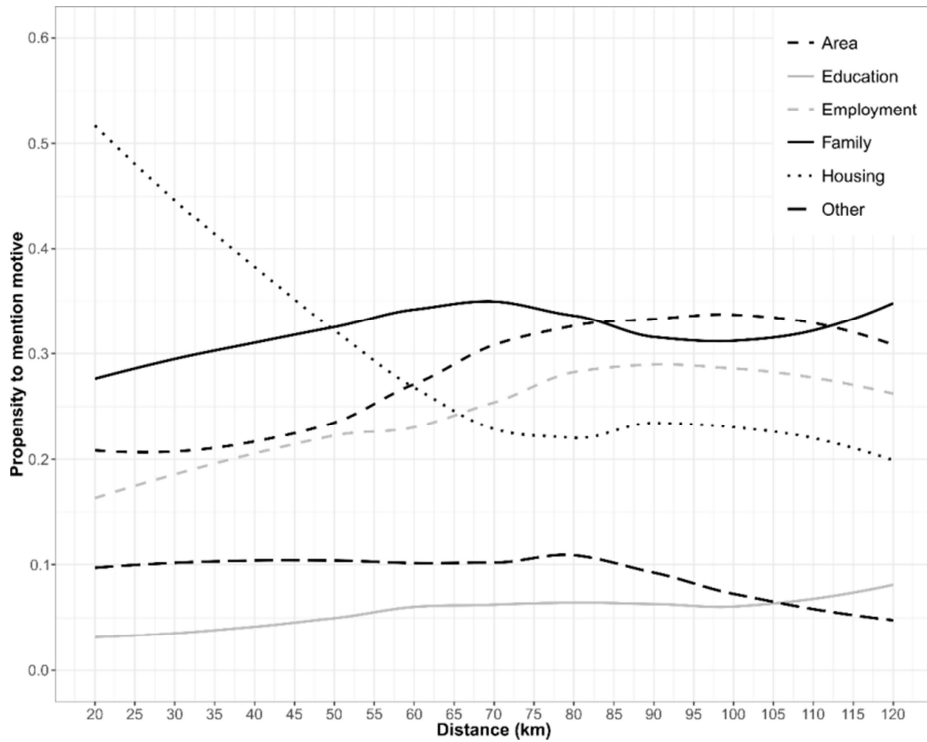
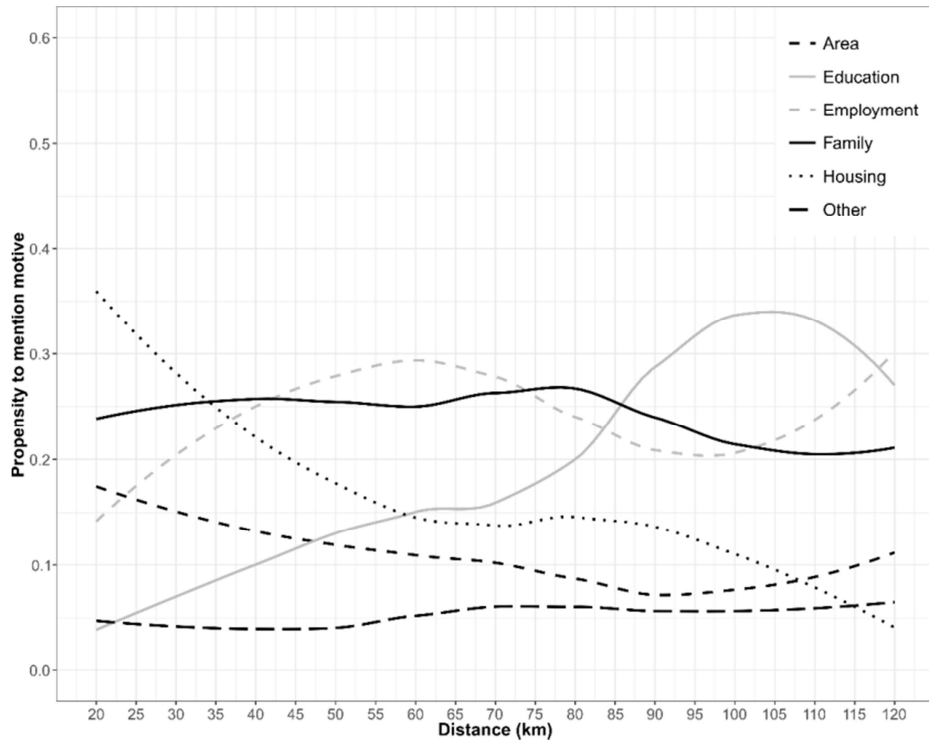


Figure 3: The propensity to mention a motive for moving within Sweden

3. Results

In a broad sense, the patterns in Figures 1–3 offer some support to the common assumptions linking longer-distance migration to employment and shorter-distance moves to housing-related concerns. Indeed, in all three countries, housing is the most commonly cited motive to move at distances of 20 km, though it soon falls away as the primary motive in Sweden and the United Kingdom at 30–40 km. Interestingly, housing is the most common motive for moving in Australia, even at distances of 50 km, and remains important thereafter. This pattern may reflect the highly suburbanised, low-density structure of Australia’s main population centres (Forster 2006). In all three countries, employment is a key motive for longer-distance migration, with approximately 30% of migration events at 120 km linked to employment-related factors.

There are other motives that appear to be of a similar level of significance to employment at longer distances. Consistent in both the United Kingdom and Sweden, the propensity to mention education as a motive increases with the distance of move. It is the most cited reason in the United Kingdom for moves of more than 90 km and is the most cited reason in Sweden for moves of more than 80 km. However, this trend is not replicated in Australia, where education is rarely cited as a motive for moving, regardless of distance. Australia is known to have a relatively low rate of domestic student migration, with only 5% of Australian students living on campus (McDonald et al. 2015), although rural-to-urban student migrations – particularly to destination campuses that specialise in niche fields – are not uncommon (Blakers et al. 2003).

The trend associated with area-related motives is also very different in Australia, where area rises to become the most commonly cited motive at distances of 80–110 km. The particular importance of area-related motives in Australia may in some way reflect the geographical variety and scale of Australia, where people have to move very long distances to change environments or to access the differing services offered between major cities, coastal areas, and remote regions (Stimson and Minnery 1998; Corcoran et al. 2010). Indeed, Australia has witnessed sizable flows of retirees towards amenity-rich environments such as the ‘sun belt’ on Australia’s Gold Coast, though recent analyses show that net gains for coastal areas have declined as rising housing costs work to deter some retirees (Bell et al. 2018). In the United Kingdom, the propensity to mention area as a motive for moving peaks between 20 km and 50 km, which fits reasonably closely to what would be expected in cases of suburbanisation/counterurbanisation, while in Sweden the importance of area is low and generally declines as distance increases.

A far more consistent pattern relates to family: Regardless of the distance, family-related motives remain important. Across the three countries, approximately 20%–30% of long-distance migration is undertaken for family-related reasons. This consistent finding is particularly noteworthy given the lack of emphasis placed on the role of family in analyses of longer-distance internal migration. The final motive category reflects cases where respondents chose the answer “Other.” As an inherently imprecise classification, it remains fairly trivial in all three countries.

4. Conclusion

Whereas internal migration is often assumed to be motivated by employment and educational considerations, and shorter-distance residential mobility by family and housing adjustments, this paper suggests that a far more nuanced, context-specific distance–motive relationship exists. In the three countries studied here, it is indeed the case that the importance of housing declines with distance, while the importance of

employment increases. However, the point at which housing-related mobility gives way to employment-led migration differs by context. According to the distance–motive trends in Figures 1–3, housing-led mobility appears to give way to employment-led migration at around 40 km in Sweden and the United Kingdom and around 70 km in Australia. Whereas inconsistencies in the distance thresholds used in previous studies are problematic when comparing results across studies, such points could be used to provide a consistent set of more conceptually appealing context-specific mobility-migration cutoffs.

The analysis also demonstrates how people move for different reasons, across different distances, in different national contexts. Regardless of the distance of move, housing remains a relatively important motive in Australia, whereas in the United Kingdom and Sweden, its relative importance drops away substantially at the longest distances. Education is an important migration motive in the United Kingdom and Sweden, increasing in significance with distance. Interestingly, the propensity to cite education as a motive is not high in Australia. Australia is also very different in terms of the importance placed on area-related reasons for moving, which come to be the most commonly cited motives at distances of 80–110 km. A surprising finding is the relative importance of family in all countries and across all distances. While typically associated with local-scale relocations, this motive is rarely mentioned in the longer-distance migration literature. From the results presented here, the role of family in long-distance migration would appear to warrant far more attention than it currently receives.

There are some limitations to our research. The creation of perfectly comparable classifications of motives for moving is impossible when using independently designed surveys from different countries. For instance, while the substantive patterns appear plausible in all three cases, we are comparing a postal survey for Sweden with two interview-based surveys for Australia and the United Kingdom. The formulation of the question on motives is also different, with the UK and Australian surveys asking about reasons for moving from a previous residence, whereas the Swedish survey is more general in its wording and does not explicitly include (to/from) direction. It could therefore be that conditions at the origin play more heavily on the answers given in the UK and Australian contexts than in the Swedish case. More broadly, our comparative analysis was limited to just three countries. The availability of and access to comparable geocoded microlevel migration data is notoriously limited. For instance, it was not possible to include the United States Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) due to its different approach to the coding of motives, while the US Current Population Survey could not be used due to the lack of detailed geocodes or distance of move.

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Appendix

Table A-1: Sub-motives forming the macro-motives in each country

UKHLS	HILDA	Swedish survey of motives
Area motives		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disliked absence of facilities/isolation Disliked area Disliked crime, vandalism, etc./area unsafe Disliked traffic (including noise or danger from traffic) Unfriendly area/disliked neighbours Wanted to move to a more rural environment Wanted to move to a specific place None of the above/other reason 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeking change of lifestyle To be closer to amenities/services/public transport To live in a better neighbourhood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change of environment Rural environment/nature/smaller place Urban environment/culture and service supply/bigger place Other related to living environment
Educational motives		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moved to term-time accommodation/college or university Left education/ended course None of the above/other reason 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To be close to place of study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commuting/distance to education Partner studying/education Study/education Other related to education
Employment motives		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decided to relocate own business Employer moved job to another place Got a different job with the same employer, which meant moving workplace Moved to be nearer work but didn't move workplace Moved to look for work Moved to start a new job with a new employer Moved to start own business Retirement (self or spouse) None of the above/other reason 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decided to relocate own business To be nearer place of work To look for work To start a new job with a new employer To start own business Work transfer Other work reasons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Career/better work opportunities Commuting/distance to work Work of partner Work/job Other related to work
Family motives		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Married/moved in with partner Moved away from family Moved in with family/moved back with family Moved in with friends Moved to be closer to family/friends Moved with spouse/partner due to their relocation Separated/divorced/split up from spouse/partner None of the above/other reason 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marital/relationship breakdown To be closer to friends and/or family To follow a spouse or parent/whole family moved To get married/moved in with partner Other personal/family reasons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being close to family/relatives/friends Forming household/love Separation/divorce Other related to family/social
Housing motives		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wanted somewhere smaller/cheaper Wanted own accommodation or to form a household Wanted more privacy/previous accommodation overcrowded Wanted bungalow/no stairs/ground-floor flat Wanted better accommodation Wanted a change To buy somewhere Needed care in sheltered accommodation/nursing home Health reasons (e.g., house too damp; house not healthy) Evicted from rented accommodation/home repossessed/other forced moves Disliked previous house/flat None of the above/other reason 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evicted Government housing (no choice) Property no longer available To get a larger/better place To get a place of my own/our own To get a smaller/less expensive place Other housing/neighbourhood reason 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing economy/contract issues Larger dwelling Neighbours Smaller/'easier' dwelling Other related to housing

